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The Artists Embracing Queer Ecology

Assistant editor Cassie Packard on confronting the toxicity that permeates our environments, bodies and lifestyles

BY **CASSIE PACKARD** IN **OPINION** | 29 JAN 25

Lizards traverse a warm, sun-soaked torso: body-made-rock. A figure presses her flesh against a tree's ridged bark; another sprawls in a meadow, tall fingers of grass clinging to her bush. At one point, leaf litter fills the frame, the bare feet that tread upon it flitting in and out of shot. Made just a few years after experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer came out as gay, *Dyketactics* (1974) is a four-minute short in which nude women frolic and touch one another outdoors in Napa Valley. Characterized by layers, unorthodox camera angles and a haptic orientation – further developed in films like *Place Mattes* (1987), in which Hammer's superimposed extremities stroke landscapes – it asserts an expansive sense of pleasure.

Barbara Hammer, *Dyketactics*, 1974, video still. Courtesy: the Estate of Barbara Hammer, New York; Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York; Company Gallery, New York; and KOW, Berlin

Dyketactics was among the first films about lesbian sex made by a lesbian, laying the groundwork for such self-reflexive, winking articulations of queer erotics as A.K. Burns and A.L. Steiner's *Community Action Center* (2010), a riotous 69-minute film that the artists specify should be viewed in group settings, foregrounding the communal dimensions of the erotic. Watching *Dyketactics* now, in a distinctly different moment for lesbian visibility, what draws me in is not its strategic 'naturalization' of sapphic desire, but its vision of queerness as a collective enterprise predicated upon an openness – a susceptibility, even – to intimacies against the grain of heteronormativity, including intimacy with nonhuman life. Hammer's film took up a strand of queer ecology *avant la lettre*, decades before artists began adopting the term.

Radical intimacy with the earth offers a compelling complement to other activist strategies and environmental stewardship practices.

‘Strange bedfellows, perhaps, queers and environmentalists, but stranger, hopefully, the results,’ wrote environmental humanities scholar Catriona Sandilands in her article ‘Lavender’s Green? Some Thoughts on Queer(y)ing Environmental Politics’ (1994), among the earliest texts on this intersection. Queer ecology – that strange result – brings to bear queer theories and practices on the ways we conceive of and engage with the more-than-human ecologies that make a world and, in turn, invites ecology to expand our view of queerness. As a construct, ‘the natural’ has a history of violent usage: hateful rhetoric frames the bodies and desires of queer subjects as either ‘animalistic’ (too natural) or ‘unnatural’ to the point of being toxic – polluting a ‘pure’ social body and the reproductive cisheteronormativity that theoretically maintains it. The conflation of queerness and toxicity is deftly détourned by artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz in their 2012 film *Toxic*: Werner Hirsch, dressed in drag, smokes a cigarette amid poisonous plants, tinsel and a slideshow inspired by mugshots – pictures of individuals deemed ‘toxic’ to society – as Ginger Brooks Takahashi recites a toxic litany that includes mushrooms, fracking and oestrogen.

Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, *Toxic*, 2012, video still. Courtesy: Ellen de Bruijne Projects Amsterdam and Marcelle Alix Paris

While queer ecology can involve an assertion of naturalness by those denied it, it tends to unravel the binaries that underlie this rhetoric in the first place: most centrally, nature-culture dualism, which places humans above and apart from everything else while obfuscating the naturecultures (scholar Donna Haraway’s portmanteau) that bind us. As artists and thinkers of the 21st century ask what queer ecology looks like on a damaged planet, the still-germinal concept is expanding and transforming, informed by the ways in which environmental toxicity corrodes boundaries and charts interdependencies; the need to look at our own bad objects in light of the climate crisis; and the messy task, articulated by Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), of ‘learning to live and die well’ together in turbulent times.

The term ‘queer ecology’ surfaced in Sandilands’s 2002 essay, ‘Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology’, about womyn’s lands in Oregon. Emerging in the US around the time of *Dyketactics*, at the intersection of lesbian-feminist separatism and the back-to-the-land movement, these rural, self-sufficient, intentional communities envisioned alternatives to capitalist patriarchy. Sandilands mapped their queer ecologies, detailing practices that ranged from employing land trusts to ensure long-term, collective ownership by lesbians, to offering cultural programmes such as ‘The Ovulars’ (1979–83): workshops on photographic techniques and ethics that built skills, community, a visual language and an archive – as highlighted in ‘A Forest Fire between Us’ (2024), an exhibition at Webber Gallery devoted to photographer and workshop facilitator Tee A. Corinne, and a book published by MACK Books, edited by Charlotte Flint. Though womyn’s lands have since dwindled in number, artist Jessica Segall, who recently embarked on an as-yet-untitled project photographing those active in the US today, points out that some of them have now protected forests from loggers for five decades – and counting.

Photograph from *Tee A. Corinne: A forest fire between us*, 2024, MACK. Courtesy: © Tee A. Corinne / Tee A. Corinne Papers, Coll. 263. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Archives and MACK, London

Sandilands's article also described community members having sex outside, extolling the earth's sexual appeal and viewing erotics as a type of ecological knowledge. Radical intimacy with the earth offers a compelling complement to other activist strategies and environmental stewardship practices. The eco-erotic is robustly theorized in *Sex Ecologies* (2021), a volume, edited by Stefanie Hessler, accompanying an eponymous exhibition at Kunsthall Trondheim. (That theme, and queer ecologies more broadly, have also featured in such recent exhibitions as 'RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology', 2023–4, at the Barbican Centre in London; 'Queer Ecologies', 2023–4, at Centre d'Art La Panera in Lleida; 'Life on Earth: Art and Ecofeminism', 2024, at The Brick in Los Angeles; and 'Queer Histories', 2024–5, at Museu de Arte de São Paulo.) Included in that book's pantheon are artist-partners and 'Ecosex Manifesto' (2011) authors Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, who have proposed that shifting how we think of the earth, from 'mother' to 'lover', may facilitate a more reciprocal relationship.

The view of nature as pure, untouched and static cannot hold.

The pair's notion of 'ecosexual' – an adjectival noun that, like 'queer', fluidly moves between a sexual identity, activist tactic and grassroots movement – was seeded in an act of wedding drag. Conceived during the struggle to legalize gay marriage – and debates over whether, with its assimilationist implications, gay marriage was something queer people even wanted – *Green Wedding to the Earth* (2008) was held with some 350 guests in a redwood forest in Santa Cruz. The work was the first of many collective queer 'weddings' to natural phenomena ranging from sea monkeys to a lake ('Ecosex Wedding Happenings', 2008–ongoing), and saw the artists fondling dirt as they and their audience vowed to become 'better lovers to the Earth'.

Beth Stephens & Annie Sprinkle, *Green Wedding to the Earth*, Santa Cruz, California. 2008, photograph. Courtesy: the artists; photograph: Lydia Daniller

‘I’ve been thinking more about the sexuality of plants than of humans,’ artist Zheng Bo told Sprinkle and Stephens in ‘A Conversation Between Three Ecosexuals’ (2021), adding that ferns have sporophyte and gametophyte generations that challenge male-female binaries and the primacy of sexual reproduction. Titled in reference to a Victorian craze for fern-collecting so fervent it depleted British plant populations, their video series ‘Pteridophilia’ (2016–ongoing) unfolds in a verdant Taiwanese forest. Quiet shots of tightly curled fiddleheads and sunlit pinnae are interspersed with porn-style scenes in which nude performers simulate kinky and queer-coded sex with the ferns. Pleasure is not without its violences; sometimes the men crush the ferns but disperse spores in the process. As with porn, we are occasionally slotted into the recipient’s perspective: we simultaneously adopt a fern’s-eye view and sexuality and feel the impediments to inhabiting it. In the legacy of much queer performance, ‘Ecosex Wedding Happenings’ and ‘Pteridophilia’ employ camp, extending its productively corrosive or toxic effects – its use of artifice to displace what is thought of as natural – not only to sex, but to nature itself. The view of nature as pure, untouched and static – some pristine enclave, hermetically sealed from humans and their cultural effects – cannot hold; everything is already contaminated, complicated, in flux.

Two decades prior, Laura Aguilar embarked on her ‘Nature Self-Portraits’ (1996), the first of several photographic series that show the nude artist, often with her face obscured or body cropped, melding with the topographies of the American Southwest. She contorts herself as if to become rock, root, landscape; intimacy springs not from touch but from mimicry, a phenomenon known for weaving strange, elaborate webs of cross-species connection in nature. In ‘Has the Queer Ever Been Human?’ (2015), scholars Mel Chen and Dana Luciano write that ‘by mimicking a boulder’, the artist – queer, fat, Chicanx – ‘enters the very nonhuman fold where some would place her, effectively displacing the centrality of the human itself ’. As it undercuts the human/nonhuman binary – endlessly, hideously employed to devalue certain lives – Aguilar’s gesture also directs our gaze further afield.

Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 2*, 2018, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Kiang Malingue

All the works constellated here are performed and embodied, rather than solely depicted. Bodily works with bodily stakes, they conjure up scholar Stacy Alaimo's notion of 'transcorporeality', wherein humans, rather than being the autonomous, bounded subjects imagined by capitalism, are materially enmeshed with other (human and nonhuman) bodies. Transcorporeality is a hinge that swings in both directions, toward positive and negative affects; it 'opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents and other actors', as Alaimo writes in *Bodily Natures* (2010). 'A trans-corporeal ethics calls us to somehow find ways of navigating through the simultaneously material, economic and cultural systems that are so harmful to the living world and yet so difficult to contest or transform.'

Increasingly, artists working with queer ecologies are answering this ethical call by turning to the pollution and toxicity that permeate environments, bodies and lifestyles. We know these anthropogenic hazards, augmented by the growth of the petrochemical industry and entrenchment of disposable plastic culture, to have devastating effects, and that degrees of exposure horrifically hew to racist, colonial and imperial mappings, as Chen and others have written. Still, as they argue in *Animacies* (2012), toxicity may have something to teach queer theory about 'the queer socialities that certain other, nonhuman intimacies portend'. Environmental toxicity becomes a means of tracing vast interdependencies, shared vulnerabilities and unevenly distributed burdens as humans and their surrounds act on one another; it affirms the inextricable ties between far-flung places, beings and processes as it underscores the urgency of attending to such entanglements.

Joshua Serafin, *V0ID by the Sea*, 2022, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Maryan Sayd

Consider the toxic turn at play in Sprinkle and Stephens's *Black Wedding to Coal* (2011). Held in the Spanish coastal city of Gijón – a former coal-industry hub that has experienced air pollution and black-stained beaches – *Black Wedding* was performed for an audience that included locals who had lost loved ones to mining accidents. Intended to be healing, the event involved the pair lying nude atop coal and attendees singing a song dedicated to Barbara, patron saint of miners. Does it change how we conceive of loving or desiring the Earth if these artist-activists – whose 2013 documentary *Goodbye Gauley Mountain: An Ecosexual Love Story* saw them protesting mountaintop removal mining in Stephens's native Appalachia – can extend those sentiments to coal, whose extraction and combustion have such adverse effects? These projects express a commitment to mitigating harm – including the destruction of natural habitats, water-quality degradation, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, and greenhouse-gas emissions – while pursuing pleasure in toxic times, perhaps even from a toxic source.

Artists working with queer ecologies are answering an ethical call by turning to the toxicity that permeates environments, bodies and lifestyles.

As scholar Heather Davis contends in *Plastic Matter* (2022), fossil fuels could be approached as a 'kind of grand-kin, highlighting the connection of our life force now with the lives of those long-dead organisms [...] but these more-than-human relations have been unearthed, weaponized'. Something of these relations is reclaimed in Joshua Serafin's *VOID* (2023), which the artist performed in New York in 2024 alongside their solo exhibition at Amant. (A video version of the work was concurrently displayed at the Venice Biennale.) Part of 'Cosmological Gangbang' (2020–ongoing) – a project whose queer ecologies are rooted in Indigenous Filipino epistemologies and precolonial conceptions of gender – *VOID* envisions a genderqueer deity for our time. The nude artist whirled and writhed on a dirt mound around a central hole filled with a black, viscous gloop closely resembling oil. Plunging their hands into this orifice, they threw sheets of the liquid into the air with such intensity that the matter itself seemed to be dancing: an animacy starkly at odds with characterizations of inert 'natural resources' – a distancing framework regularly put in service of extractivist worldviews. 'Maybe you think this distance and material will protect you [...] but then you realize it doesn't protect you from anything,' declared Serafin, slicked with the substance. In *Exposed* (2016), Alaimo writes that activists and artists may 'perform exposure' to 'grapple with the particular entanglements of vulnerability and complicity that radiate from [anthropogenic] disasters and their terribly disjunctive connection to everyday life in the industrialized world'. Colonial fantasies of impenetrability and sovereignty become more ludicrous with every display of bodily permeability to the stuff of the world.

Jessica Segall, *Human Energy*, 2023, production still. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Zefrey Throwell

Segall's *Human Energy* (2023), the obverse of her 'land dyke' project, parses such fantasies as it considers sticky relays of extractivism and desire. Presented as a four-channel installation at Smack Mellon in New York in 2023, the video portrays the artist, in dominatrix gear, presiding over sprawling oil fields in Kern County, California. Some shots offer a God's-eye view of endless pumpjacks plunging into the earth; others, in an absurdist riff on Western genre tropes with their expansionist underpinnings, see Segall riding one of the pumpjacks as if it were a bucking bronco. BDSM becomes a means of working through power relations and 'improper desires' as they relate to extractivism: fossil fuel companies' drives to penetrate the earth at scale; the 'switch' wherein humans are in turn subject to toxic pollutants and the fallout of climate change; the ways in which our own fetishizations of convenience lubricate this perpetual motion machine. While globally interconnected, oil (sub) cultures take many forms: on another channel, queer performers sensually immerse themselves in crude oil at a spa in Azerbaijan, a wellness tourism hotspot where oil baths are viewed as medicinal. A final screen shows the pumpjacks plugging away by night as men have sex in the oil fields; the toxicity of this place freed it to be used as a queer cruising ground. Delving into petroculture's libidinal undercurrents, *Human Energy* critiques our dependence on oil as it acknowledges the complexity, intensity and range of our embodied ties to it.

Scholar Timothy Morton, in their 2010 article 'Queer Ecology', argues that ecology 'demands intimacies with other beings that queer theory also demands, in another key'. Ecology and queerness are fundamentally concerned with relationships: bodies that touch; material exchanges; hopes for mutualism; webs of connection that delight, hurt, surprise and undo us. Artworks made in this spirit – here, embodied works, spanning from the 1970s to the speculative present, which increasingly grapple with toxicity – are attuned to the ways in which environmental pleasure and pollution alike evince our permeability to one another. They invite us to reckon with the insistency of matter and the impossibility of purity; with the exigencies of intimacy, across difference and distance; with the worlds we think we want and the ones we make every day.

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Main image: Jessica Segall, Human Energy *(detail), 2023, production still. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Zefrey Throwell*

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TAGS

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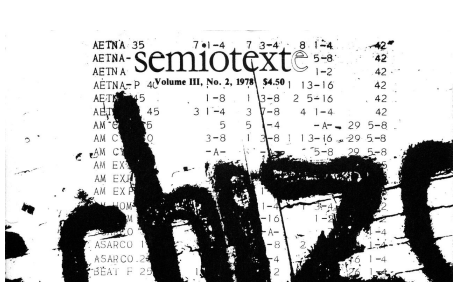

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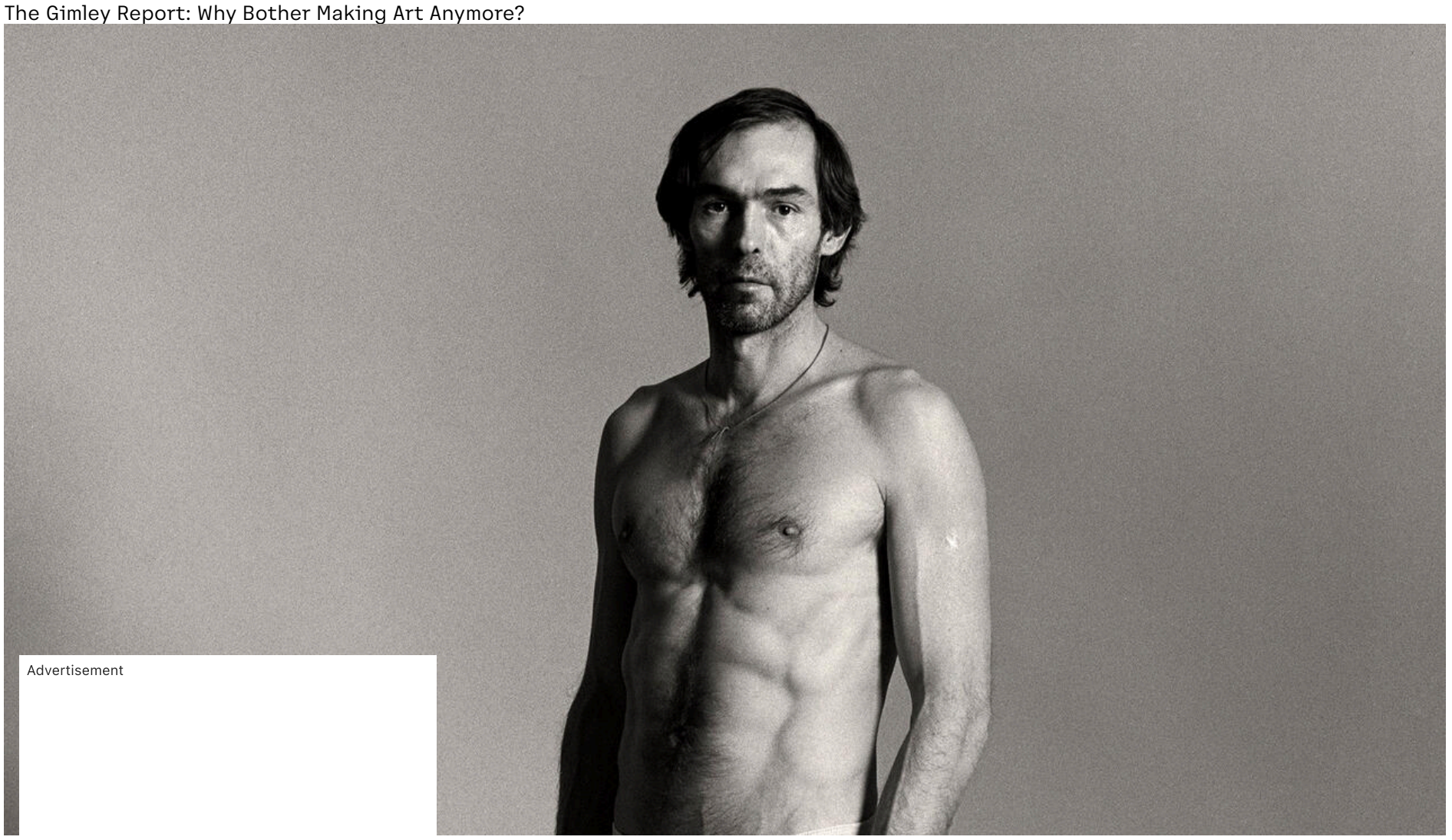

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